

Report of the Children's Services SEND enquiry day

Background

The enquiry day was held at the Dorset History Centre on Tuesday 15th January and the attendees, who included school leaders, parents and support staff, are attached as **Appendix 1**.

The purpose of the day was

1. To enquire of stakeholders how the changes in delivery and funding of SEND is impacting on quality, performance and the security of the budget
2. To identify evidence of progress in delivering the SEND strategy action plan
3. To investigate what progress has been made in other budget delivery changes and identify any issues the cabinet might wish to consider in recommendations to the shadow executive before the shadow council confirms its budget, with a particular reference to SEND and Children Looked

The enquiry day focused on the first purpose allowing the department to use the results to help them in identifying evidence in delivering their action plan. We had three sessions in the morning with school leaders, parents and support staff, all of which provided valuable inputs which have been used to support this main report. Summaries of these sessions are attached as separate appendices. A short discussion on the latest financial position was held with the CS finance officers and some aspects of expenditure was also discussed at the Audit and Governance Committee on Monday 21st January. There are some financial recommendations in this report.

Main Findings

Financial

Clearly there was some disquiet about the total funding available to deliver this service, particularly in the High Needs Budget and the staffing needed to manage the growth of EHCPs effectively. We would make the following proposals:

1. DCC should write a strong letter to the Dorset MPs to seek their support for a much fairer distribution of funds to the DSG for Dorset schools
2. DCC should join with all LAs to press the Government for additional funds for the HN budget and provide suitable evidence of the growth in numbers and high level costs for EHCPs
3. Ray Bryan will raise the lack of involvement of the NHS in delivering and paying for the "H" aspect of the plans. Should school nurses be re-introduced?
4. As a matter of urgency capital expenditure should be sought to expand the local provision for the most severe needs. The development of Bovington and the local centres will be a positive contribution but we should seriously explore providing accommodation units for those very high cost students who presently are supported by the private sector outside the county. This will be a long term saving.
5. A temporary £1m contribution was made to the budget covering the last two years and leading into next year. We recommend the Unitary Council to consolidate this into the base line budget and would suggest that it should equate to £500k annually. Its main purpose was to enlarge the team creating and reviewing EHCPs and each member of this team has 200 EHCPs to manage and the needs of parents and students and other services to be included in the process suggest that this figure is far too high. Even if the number of EHCPs levels off,

which is not yet likely, the extra funding is necessary to make the service more effective for its stakeholders.

6. Although there is not a figure attached to this next item we recommend that a contingency amount should be allocated to a restructuring of social work in the department with more staff needed to help with preventative work. In the longer term this might actually reduce the number of children in care, and hence lead to savings.

Communications

This area caused the most concern, especially for the parents, although there was an internal issue as well. Some of the issues raised are already in the pipeline, some need more research with parents and some need allocation of resources internally. The following actions are proposed:

1. Mel Craven should meet with the Parent/Carers group led by Elaine Okopski and establish what changes they want to happen for them. Some of these include : less use of technical language; easy access to help; the establishment of a newsletter meeting parental needs; better support for completing forms and more involvement in drawing up the plans at an earlier part of the process; more help in understanding the process as a whole and what the funding levels mean attached to the bands.
2. The SEND team should review how it manages phone communications with parents
3. Once the feedback comes with more details from Mel Craven, officers should talk through with Cabinet colleagues and members of this panel to review how suggestions can be implemented.
4. Internal IT systems need a complete review so that communications between SEND team, Transport, FPZ, Social Services, Health Services and Schools are managed more effectively. The other benefit of this is that it enables virtual groups to meet more easily where more than one agency is working with a child.
5. Clearer rules on how and who PAs and drivers should communicate with should be identified and shared with parents and schools.
6. The Unitary council should see itself as a coordinator for all the services that should be involved in the well-being of SEND students.
7. By encouraging more parental inclusion in the whole EHCP process we can help manage expectations and also potentially limit the number of costly tribunals.
8. Parental roles (including support) agreed & written into EHCP's

Issues raised by parents

A list of **all** the points raised by parents in response to the questions asked is included in **Appendix 2**. **A separate report is being produced for parents which will include more details**. These are summarised into the 3 sections below and actions to alleviate the concerns of parents are, in some cases, already being tackled by the department but any gaps will be established by some of the steps listed above.

Understanding the process

1. There is a need for clear sources of help and guidance for parents to help them understand the process of drawing up an EHCP with links to other information sources about a particular diagnosis. A link to this should be given to parents when they first seek a diagnosis.

2. It needs to be recognised that parents of SEND children are going to need more support and reassurance than parents of other children
3. All agencies need to be aware of their role in drawing up a plan and parents need to have a clear understanding of what they should expect from each agency
4. Diagnoses, particularly those requiring a Health input often take too long to get started/completed. This needs exploring with the CCG.
5. Staff drawing up plans should have the same guidance notes and understand their role in the process and the expectations of the parents
6. A key element in the guidelines will be time scales and an understanding of the communication lines.
7. Can a training programme be devised for new parents who want to play their role in supporting the EHCP as effectively as possible?
8. Strong trust between the LA and parents needs to be re-established

Managing the EHCP process

1. Parents do not only want to be involved once a year and want to be more involved as the plan is being put together so that they fully understand what is happening and can make points earlier rather than at appeal
2. We need to change the culture so that parents do not feel they are in a battle
3. The language of the plan should be simpler and clearly state expectations for and of the parents
4. A better understanding of banding, how it is paid for and what it delivers would be helpful
5. How the outcomes are identified and progress towards them measured should be clearer to parents and students, and if there are changes to be made due to lack of progress, great progress or changes in need identified, these should be shared immediately with parents
6. Parental expectations within the resources available need to be managed effectively
7. The review process could be improved, including parental involvement, other agency involvement, time scales, judgements on outcomes....

Travel arrangements

1. Communications between the Transport Team, the SEND travel team, parents, Travel providers, drivers, PAs, schools and students should be explored, including the roles and expectations of each part of the process, especially how changes/absences are dealt with
2. Is there any help that can be provided for children to enable them to participate in everyday after school activities?
3. Can parents, whose children share transport, be supported in communicating with other parents if desired?
4. Can the length of journeys of vulnerable children be limited wherever possible?

Other issues

There needs to be a greater Local Authority role in challenging the allocation of pupils across schools & academies to seek a 'fairer distribution' – We mustn't provide reasons for schools not to be inclusive.

Councillors should review their induction programme and way of working, ensuring there is a group continuing the approach taken by this review team,